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REFORM

SUBJECT: MEPI/GOB REGIONAL ARAB WOMEN'S CONFERENCE A
SMASHING SUCCESS

¶1. (U) Summary: MEPI and the Bahraini MFA joined forces to co-host a MENA regional conference March 27-28 to celebrate the "Successes of Women as Leaders of Change". More than 120 women leaders from 16 Arab countries shared their recent unprecedented achievements of reform in the legal, economic and political fields, and developed strategies for action to build on these successes. Press coverage of the event was positive and extensive, including Bahraini press, regional press, and satellite television CNBC Arabia. Those interviewed welcomed this form of foreign assistance, which focuses on local knowledge transfer and capacity-building enabling women to work for change within their societies. End summary.

¶2. (U) Women from 16 Arab countries converged on Manama, Bahrain for the "Successes of Women as Leaders of Change" conference March 27 and 28, co-hosted by MEPI and the Bahraini MFA, and supported by the Bahraini Supreme Council for Women. The one hundred twenty-one women and fourteen men that attended represented leaders across a wide range of fields, including: legal professionals, civil society activists, parliamentarians, entrepreneurs, businesswomen, journalists and academics. The conference highlighted the successes of women's movements that have pushed for and achieved reform and are contributing to their nation's democratic advancement. The American Bar Association provided logistical support.

Conference Offerings

¶3. (U) The first day of the conference highlighted successful models of women's collective action in the areas of family law reform, economic empowerment and political participation. The Moroccan delegation discussed the strategies they employed and coalitions they built to push for successful reforms of the Mudawana family law. A second panel on economic empowerment featured businesswomen from Bahrain, Tunisia and the UAE who discussed the increasing role of women as part of the labor force and production, the success of small business loans to women who have subsequently developed large model businesses, and the growing importance of women-run family businesses in Arab economies. On the political participation panel, the Director for Women's Empowerment at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, discussed Saudi women's recent successful efforts to participate as voters and candidates in various Chambers of Commerce elections across the Kingdom. The Kuwaiti delegation represented three generations of women that fought for and achieved the right to vote. They shared with the plenary how they were able to mobilize support, their strategies for success, and future plans to utilize this newly gained power for increased opportunities for women.

¶4. (U) The second day was dedicated to workshops on skills and strategies for taking these successes to the next level. Participants were given the choice of participating in one of three skills-building workshops on coalition building, negotiation or communication. The women provided enthusiastic feedback on this professional training, and many approached the organizers to suggest that even more such training be done in future conferences. In the afternoon, the women broke into working groups along the three themes. They outlined specific challenges to reform and developed plans of action using lessons learned from successes achieved to date and new strategies to move forward. These action plans were presented in the concluding session and were taken back by each delegation to their respective countries.

Media Coverage and Reaction

¶5. (U) Opportunities for media coverage included a press conference with five panelists, a press roundtable with NEA/FO Senior Advisor Erin Walsh and the DCM, and several individual interviews (television and print) with participants. Coverage was extensive and included Bahraini Arabic and English press, regional Arabic and English press, and participant interviews and multiple-day coverage on CNBC Arabia satellite station.

¶6. (U) Arabic Daily Al-Wasat devoted a two-page spread April 2 to the conference. The editor of the special report, Nada Al-Wadi, questioned in an op-ed piece why only foreign countries and institutions support the empowerment of women while efforts of Arab governments and institutions to empower women are lacking. She wrote: "We need Arab or GCC organizations that will unify the efforts of women and take

advantage of the experiences of women in other Arab countries. Do we always need foreign support to teach us how to do this?"

¶7. (U) Women interviewed by Al-Wasat drew a distinction between foreign interference in local issues and foreign assistance to develop women to work within their environments. Jordanian journalist and activist Rana Al-Hussaini said that the conference did not impose foreign beliefs upon the participants but gave them an opportunity to talk openly of their problems in order to resolve them. Kuwait-based Arabian and Regional Center for Environment Legislation Chairwoman Badriya Al-Awadi said, "Unfortunately Arab countries have not paid attention to the issues that MEPI has tackled. MEPI has focused on women's issues because giving women their rights is an important aspect of democracy." Bahraini political opposition leader and professor Munira Fakhro asked rhetorically, "How can we accept democratic principles and at the same time reject ideas that are in favor of women's rights, considering them foreign interference?"

¶8. (U) Columnist Abdulla Al-Ayoobi from Arabic daily Akhbar Al-Khaleej, traditionally critical of U.S. foreign policy, March 29 welcomed the conference as another example of how civil society groups are working to empower women against traditions and customs that have oppressed them. He wrote: "We need continued hard work to cause a revolution against those traditions that are mostly attributed to religion. We need a continuity of conferences such as this, and we must make efforts to abolish discrimination against women."

Comment

¶9. (U) The conference was a model of multilateral cooperation that resulted in a prominent, effective event for the region, advancing the objectives of the US Freedom Agenda, and supporting MEPI and mission goals to promote women's empowerment in Bahrain and the greater NEA region. MFA officials were very pleased with the outcome of the

conference and the raising of Bahrain's profile in terms of supporting women's progress. Participants were very appreciative of the opportunity the conference afforded to draw attention to women's movements across the Arab world and celebrate recent advances.

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